

November 8, 2002
AGENDA ITEM # 11

To: Delta Protection Commission

From: Margit Aramburu, Executive Director

Subject: Briefing on Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and Application to Delineate the Delta Primary Zone a State Conservation Priority Area; Position of Support
(For Commission Action)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

After receiving the briefing on the CREP and the application to delineate the Delta Primary Zone a State Conservation Priority Area, the Commission should consider adopting a position of support for the application submitted to the Farm Service Agency.

BACKGROUND:

The United States Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Area implements the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). The CREP program is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners. The program provides incentive payments for installing specific conservation practices. The incentive payments are in the form of annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term protection of natural resources. A CREP set-aside agreement allows higher rent payments than regular USDA Conservation Reserve Program agreements, a significant advantage in California.

Through the work of the CALFED Bay Delta Public Advisory Committee's Working Landscapes Subcommittee, Department of Food and Agriculture staff prepared and submitted the attached application to delineate the Delta Primary Zone a State Conservation Priority Area. In most of California, the CREP program can only be implemented in a State Conservation Priority Area.

In the North Central Valley CREP, farmers can enter into 10 to 15-year contracts to temporarily convert cropland to native grasses and trees in return for annual payments. At the end of the contract period, the contract can be extended or cancelled and the land can be returned to agriculture. In addition, the North Central Valley CREP

applied to US Fish and Wildlife Service, and received a biological opinion that protected participating landowners from the Endangered Species Act's "take" provisions.

STATUS OF REVIEW OF THE APPLICATION:

The draft application was presented to the Commission's Agriculture Committee Meeting on October 17, 2002. The matter was not agendaized so no formal action was taken. Several Commissioners had questions about how the program could apply in the Delta, the minimum length of contracts, and the amount of rental payments.

The application was reviewed and favorably received at the October 25, 2002 State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting. A response on the application is expected in early 2003.

PROPOSED POSITION OF SUPPORT:

The Commission could support the proposed application as consistent with the policies of the Land Use and Resource Management Plan for the Primary Zone of the Delta:

- The program supports commercial agriculture in the Delta.
- The program recognizes the unique qualities of the Delta that make it well suited for agriculture.
- The program supports the long-term viability of commercial agriculture in the Delta and its economic importance to the State and local communities.
- The program could help minimize the need for costly production inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.
- The program encourages management of agricultural lands that maximize wildlife habitat seasonally and year-round.
- Because the program focuses on marginal agricultural land and allows hunting, CREP lands can actually increase in value and improve the local tax base.

CONSISTENCY WITH CALFED:

The CRP and CREP were not identified by CALFED as programs (Category A or Category B) that meet CALFED objectives, so they are not currently subject to any CALFED requirements.

Attachments:

Web Site: CREP

Web Site: CREP, North Central Valley

Application (16 pages)